Fine Arts in the Ukraine

By M. Buraček

532 /401/ Ukrainian literature had important representatives already in the first half of the nineteenth century whereas the fine arts did not produce any names of importance till the end of the century. But the actual development of the fine arts in the Ukraine started only in the twentieth century, the years after the revolution being the most decisive ones for the further development of the fine arts.

[208] During the civil war art played an important part in propaganda and agitation. Millions of posters, slogans, and illustrations flooded the country. Demonstrations, theatrical performances, manifestations of all sorts of programs of the various "fronts" -- fronts of the industrial areas, of the rural areas, of the educational realm, of sanitary measures -- all these required the cooperation of the artist. A number of "peasant homes" in Kiev, Kharkov, Odessa, Dniepropetrovsk and other cities as well as soldiers' barracks, clubs, etc. were ornamented with fresco paintings, ornaments and decorations.

Easel painting was virtually unknown. This was proved in 1918 in the "Exhibition of Ukrainian Artists", where the paintings exhibited were small in number and had no special qualities. In 1920, in a small room in Kiev, another exhibition of paintings was shown, and once more it had no broad character. Only at the beginning of 1925, at the opening of the so-called Fair of the 'Kontrakty' /a special section of the city of Kiev/ in Kiev, a rather interesting exhibition was shown in which not only painters but also graphic artists and sculptors participated.

When, after the civil war, attention was paid to economic reconstruction, the role of the artist in social life also changed. Draftsmen were employed as illustrators and caricaturists. The publishing houses ordered dust jackets, book illustrations, original type, and the like, from the artists. Painters went to work on portraits of statesmen and theatrical designs. Since that time, art for art's sake is on its way out, and the artists are entering more and more into the service of everyday life and economy. The gap between art and life becomes smaller and smaller. Of course, art is not exclusively dedicated to utilitarian purposes. At the same time, the artists are in search of a new language, of a new style. And eventually the time came when this search brought about a grouping together of the artists in a firm organization.

In 1926, upon the initiative of the artists, F. Krycevs'kyj, Kozik,

532 and B. Pylypenko a group was formed in Kiev under the /402/ name of "Asocijacija Khudozhnykiv chervonoi Ukrainy -- AKhChU" (Association of the Artists of the Red Ukraine). At the same time a second organization was founded, the "Asocijacija revol'ucijnych mytciv Ukrainy -- ARMU" (Association of Revoluationary Artists of the Ukraine), upon the initiative of the President of the Kiev Art Institute, Vrona, and of the artists, M. Bojchuk, Sedl'ar, M. Burachek and others. Finally, in 1927, still another Kiev society was formed, the "Objednann'a suchasnych mytciv Ukrainy -- OSMU" (Association of Contemporary Artist of the Ukraine), founded by the Kiev artists, Taran, Kramarenko, and others.

To the AKhChU belong artists who live in various cities of the Ukraine. In 1927, this Association opened its first exhibition in Kharkov under the title "Chudozhnyk-s'ohodni" ("The Artist of Today"). The purpose of this exhibition was not to show artistic achievements, but to show how the artist works under the new conditions and what possibilities were open to him. The exhibition included paintings, drawings, sketches for scene designs, sculptures, puppets, even artistically woven materials, and embroideries. The exhibition indicated that we do have artistic talents in Kharkov, who must be supported and who create works that are in tune with our present-day society.

The first exhibition of the ARMU took place in March 1927 in the halls of the Museum of Art History in Kharkov. Most of the artists belonging to this Association came from Kiev; some were from Kharkov and Odessa. They represented various styles and were not bound together by a common stylistic principle. There was expressionism (Eleva), constructivism (Ermilov), stylization following old old Ukrainian art and primitivism (Schlechtmann, Misin, Lepkivs'kyj, Padalka), pure painting of the academic style (the dry, colorless but sure draftsman Prof. Saronov), subject-conscious imitators of past masters (Prokhorov with his "Council of Women" and the "Sten'ka"). Moreover, there were the outstanding landscape paintings of Prof. Simonov, impressionistic landscape by M. Burachek and Cerkas'kyj, strong still-life pictures by Taran. The graphic arts and scene designs were likewise represented. Most of the interest focused on the expressionistic scene designs by V. Meller and O. Khvostok.

Next followed an exhibition by the AKhChU which featured the representatives of stylization (Ivanov, Zhuk) and of expressionism (Tkachenko). In general, this exhibition, though weaker than the preceding one, showed more uniformity.

532 The fourth exhibition took its cue from the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution. It took place in the newly erected Palace of State Industry, a large edifice in honor of economic socialization. A greater number of works of art were exhibited than in the previous exhibitions. It was an all-Ukrainian exhibition, and all styles of art were exhibited, styles that had hitherto been shown in isolation.

As early as November 1917, when the Ukrainian Academy of Arts was founded, the professors were divided into two stylistic groups. /403/ One group was orientated toward western Europe. These artists found the essence of Ukrainian art in genre pictures and Ukrainian landscapes to which they brought national coloring and the mood of intimacy. The artist used the techniques which general European art had used in the past and is still using today. Members of this group were O. Murashko, M. Burachek, F. Krychevs'kyj, and, in part, T. M. Zhuk as well as J. Narbut. Narbut's talent had a retrospective flavor, and he felt, unlike any other artist, the beauty of ancient popular Ukrainian art. Endowed with a wonderful gift of intuition, he resurrected the Ukrainian graphic arts. He learned by studying the treasures of old Ukrainian art, though he managed eventually to make each of his works of art, which he based upon traditional motives, so unique that the well-known motif appeared renovated. Hence Narbut succeeded in reviving and continuing traditional Ukrainian art.

Aside from this decidedly retrospective school, which attempts to make the present conform to the past, there is still another movement which falls back on the past though it pays stronger tribute to the present time. This movement is represented by Prof. M. Bojchuk. The artists belonging to this school are ardent admirers of the ancient icons, portraits and woodcuts, and they introduce these elements of ancient Ukrainian art into their works of art of today. They use the forms (patterns) of the past and fill them with contemporary content, especially with dynamic forceful revolutionary subjects, subjects that are essentially different from the saints of the icons. This school attempted to express the idea and emotional world of the Ukraine of the revolutionary period, and in doing this the artists adopted all too rigid forms and paid almost no attention to color. To be sure, this school has many healthy roots, but it is rather hopeless to squeeze such subjects as "Execution by a Firing Squad" or "Defense of a City" into ancient molds. It is permissible to start from the saints of the icons and the patterns of our ancient art, but one has to use these elements in an entirely new manner.

In the life system of the USSR art must not be the product of a special group of individuals, but the product of a collective, a work of the total working-class and peasant-class society. Soviet art not

532 only faces the task of serving the masses, but the masses themselves must be drawn into the process of artistic creation. This is the reason why, in addition to the above-mentioned "control" exhibitions, migratory exhibitions are being organized which are shown in the factories and settlements of the provincial cities and serve to make the fine arts popular among the workers and peasants. Such exhibitions are accompanied by lectures and explanations.

At the present time the tasks of our art lie not in the field of formalistic search. The path for our creative efforts lies in the organic relationship with the creative process of the proletariat and of the working peasantry.